

## **14 How Does Prayer Work?**<sup>1</sup>

Intercession, praying for someone else, may seem the most strange form of prayer. What kind of father refrains from giving good gifts to his children until another member of the family asks him to do so? What is the logic of intercession? Why does it work (when it does)?

### **1 Intercession Presupposes that God's Policy is to Involve Us**

The Bible's first intercessor provides a starting point for understanding intercession (see Gen 18:17-33). Abraham is destined to be a blessing to the world, and has a related obligation to the faithful exercise of authority. It is in this double connection that Yahweh reveals to him the calamity that is to come on Sodom, and waits to discover his response. We might expect Abraham to enthuse over this disaster because it constitutes good news for Sodom's victims. In fact it leads Abraham to challenge God about how authority is to be implemented. The expectations Yahweh has of Abraham are turned back on Yahweh. In the conversation that ensues, Yahweh agrees to see that the authority is indeed exercised in a proper way.

A pattern about God's activity in the world, especially with regard to the exercise of authority in relation to wrongdoing, appears for the first time here. God announces an intention, but then (strangely) does not set about putting the intention into effect. What goes on between God and people who are not directly affected will decide whether God's intention is implemented. Abraham plays a role God intends for him, the taking of a share in the process whereby decisions are taken and implemented in the world. For some reason God does not do that alone, but involves Abraham. What we call intercessory prayer is the way Abraham fulfils this calling.

If intercession is a way Abraham accepts an involvement in God's working in the world, the background to intercession lies even further back in the Bible, in its first chapter. In general, indeed, Abraham's role is to be God's means of realizing the purpose that goes back to creation, a purpose to bless the world that failed to find realization in Gen 1 - 11. God recalls that purpose when telling us the thinking that led to explaining to Abraham what was to happen (Gen 18:18). This particular role of intercession in Gen 18 is part of Abraham's bringing about the blessing of the world that God intended from creation. His prayer works on the basis of a fundamental aspect of the way God intended to relate to human beings as created. God created us as Godlike and commissioned us to share in God's work in the world. The Abraham story suggests that intercession is one of the ways in which human beings do that. Indeed, this makes intercession an inevitable part of human life.

Abraham is intended not only to pray for the world's blessing but to stimulate the world into praying for blessing for itself. All peoples are to "be blessed" or to "bless themselves" by Abraham. The promise appears in two different forms of the verb; in some, at least (namely, in Gen 22:18 and 26:4) Yahweh speaks unambiguously of people "blessing themselves" by Abraham. To "bless yourself" is to "pray to be blessed as he is blessed" (NEB).

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<sup>1</sup> First published as "The Logic of Intercession" in *Theology* 99 (1998):262-70.

That is not intercession but supplication, prayer for oneself, but it links with another element in the Abraham story, for already Melchizedek has “blessed Abraham” (Gen 14:19). What does it mean to bless someone else? Melchizedek blesses Abraham by saying “blessed be Abraham by God Most High.” There is no “be” expressed in that sentence; Melchizedek declares that Abraham is blessed. It looks as if Melchizedek has power to bless Abraham. If that were uncertain, it becomes more explicit the next time a human being blesses another, when Rebekah’s family bless Rebekah (Gen 24:60): “Become thousands of myriads; your offspring are to gain possession of the gates of their foes.” Here the first verb is an imperative, a verb that sounds like a command but as much suggests a commission, a promise, and a declaration of what will be. “Become thousands of myriads.” The second verb is a jussive, a third-person imperative; we do not have an equivalent in English. We might think of it as a third-person command, a declaration of what must and shall be: “Your offspring are to gain possession of their foes.”

Human beings sometimes have the power to tell other people in God’s name that they can, must, and will enjoy certain blessings and achievements. Where does that power come from? Theologically it is the same commission in Gen 1:26 that lies behind the human power to bless, and the human power to curse, which Noah had (Gen 9:25) and which ordinary people evidently also have (e.g., Lev 20:9). References by Jesus and Paul to blessing and cursing, and actual blessings and curses, show how this power continues in the New Testament (e.g., Luke 6:28; Rom 12:14; Gal 1:8-9). The movie *Antonia’s Line* contains a frightening scene where a woman curses a would-be rapist, who then experiences a terrible beating. The power to curse is part of God’s delegating authority to us as human beings. Human words can have the power and effectiveness of God’s own words.

Prayers of blessing and cursing are relatives of prayers of intercession. They are part of the way we are involved in running the world on God’s behalf.

## 2 Intercession as the Task of a Prophet

The point about the significance of intercession may be made in another way by noting that Abraham is the first prophet in the Bible; he is called such explicitly because he is an intercessor (see Gen 20:7, 17). One of the implications of this story of Abraham and Abimelech is that there are apparently no moral conditions attached to intercession. The answering of prayer does not depend on the uprightness of the person praying, just as the uttering of a divine word does not imply the uprightness of the prophet (compare Jesus’ comments in Matt 7:21-23).

Intercession was integral to prophecy. The first person for whom “prophet” is the dominant designation is Samuel. When the people are the object of his prophetic rebuke, their instinctive reaction is to ask him to pray for them, and his response includes the assurance that he would view it as a sin against Yahweh if he stopped doing so (1 Sam 12:19, 23). Amos 7 well illustrates the point that being a prophet involves being an intercessor, as Amos instinctively asks for the suspending of the very punishments that he announces. In Amos’s case, before we are assured that he indeed

confronted people with Yahweh's warnings (Amos 7:10-17) we meet with a prophet who simply takes for granted that his job is to confront God when given pictures of calamity, to query whether punishment really should be implemented (Amos 7:1-6). Admittedly Amos does not confront Yahweh's third and fourth pictures (Amos 7:7-9; 8:1-3), which may imply that there is a time when prayer can be answered and a time when it cannot.

Moses is also called a prophet, and he too is an intercessor, though Ps 99:6 perhaps assumes that Moses prays as priest; the Aaronic priesthood interceded for the people in presenting their offerings. The conversations between Moses and Yahweh in Exod 32 – 34 illustrate the same dynamics as those involving Abraham and Samuel. Yahweh declares the intention to annihilate the people. Moses responds with a number of reasons why Yahweh should not do so: it is inconsistent with the activity of bringing them out of Egypt, it will make a fool of Yahweh in the eyes of the Egyptians, and it conflicts with the undertakings given to Israel's ancestors. Yahweh is convinced, and has a change of mind (Exod 32:7-14). When we intervene in some context to speak on someone's behalf, we may well be concerned to commend them as worth acting on behalf of. This is also a feature of intercession. In thanksgiving the intercessor draws attention to what God has already achieved in a person's life, which is a reason for God's work in them to be taken further (cf. Phil 1:3-5).

Human beings fulfill their prophetic/priestly intercessory vocation when they query whether God's intentions regarding calamity should be implemented. A remark of God's to Ezekiel makes the point very sharply. Among the ills of the household of Israel, including its prophets, is that "I sought for someone from among them as a repairer of the wall and one who would stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I did not find anyone" (Ezek 22:30). Isaiah 62:6-7 offers a variant on the same picture. God has made and announced certain decisions regarding Jerusalem-Zion's restoration, decisions that might have seemed slow to be implemented. Now God recalls having also made sure that there were people who would press for this implementation. God appoints God's own reminders, people to trouble God. Jeremiah's story proves the rule as the prophet is forbidden to intercede in order to get a decision changed and thus to fulfill the normal God-appointed role of a prophet by advocating alternative actions to those Yahweh announces. The reason is that the people's punishment is now irrevocable (Jer 14 – 15). It is not explicit whether Jeremiah is to take this as Yahweh's final word, in keeping with the second pair of Amos's visions, or whether it is an implicit invitation to another form of intercession.

These examples of prophetic intercession suggest that special significance attaches to intercession as a means of seeing that people do not pay the penalty for their failures. Praying for mercy and forgiveness for people is of decisive importance to what actually happens to them. The comprehensive failure of Jonah as prophet not surprisingly includes a failure here as intercessor. When he ought to have been praying in the ship, he was fast asleep (Jonah 1), and when he ought to have been concerned for Nineveh, he was only concerned about his parasol-plant (Jonah 4). Yet the story also shows that God need not be constrained by the failures of intercessors.

Intercession is part of a prophet's role for the same reason that prophecy is part of a prophet's role. It arises from a prophet's being admitted to Yahweh's cabinet (Jer 23:18). As members of this cabinet, prophets know about its decisions and are therefore in a position to prophesy, but also in a position to take part in its actual deliberations, and in particular to question plans announced by Yahweh. Prophets urge God to take mercy seriously as they urge people to take wrath seriously. As individuals identified with both parties and with neither, their role is thus uncomfortable and isolated.

There is a long Christian tradition of praying to the saints or asking the saints for their prayers. This practice does not appear within either Testament. On the other hand, angels belong with prophets in Yahweh's cabinet, and thus they, too, take part in its deliberations by interceding for us and for the world. The vision of this in Zech 3 also portrays a heavenly being interceding against us, a heavenly adversary or accuser (cf. Job 1 - 2; the Hebrew word *hassatan* means "the adversary"). There is a hint that this figure has a role as His Majesty's loyal opposition but fulfills his adversarial role misguidedly or too enthusiastically. Perhaps it might be possible to redeem him by appealing to him to fulfill his proper vocation by intervening against the wicked who ought to be the objects of his hostile intervention. Appeal to the Adversary would thus be a way of appealing for justice to be done.

### 3 Intercession Presupposes that God is Like the Rector

If God invites human beings in general, and prophets and intercessors in particular, to take a share in the making of decisions concerning what happens in the world, this implies a markedly different understanding of God and of God's relationship with the world from the one implicit in much Christian theology and piety. That often thinks of God as like a king, and a king who exercises a sovereignty more like absolute power than anything we see in a western monarchy. It is when this picture is combined with that of God as a father who obviously wants what is best for his children that difficulties are generated for an understanding of how things actually are in the world or the church. Those pictures are scriptural ones, but they mislead if they are taken as the whole truth. The Bible also implies another picture that needs combining with those. God is also like a (half-decent) rector or senior pastor. A rector does not decide alone on parish policies and implement them, but involves the people of the parish in the process of decision-making and implementation. The rector does not act in isolation but collaboratively. Likewise God does not act alone, but collaboratively.

It is in keeping with this inclination that God involves people such as prophets in decision-making. Prophets are God's assistant ministers, troubling God as assistant ministers trouble rectors (as my rector used to tell me). The story told in the Christian Bible as a whole and the story of the church and the nations also illustrates the way God declines to act alone and monastically. Those stories show God not generally imposing a will on people but seeking to draw people into the fulfillment of the divine purpose, though usually failing. So the rector reflects God's way of setting about the implementing of a purpose. Perhaps God's purpose embraces the process as well as the result, because the process reflects something of what God wants

to achieve, something of the aim; it requires the involvement of people. Intercession is one way we are involved and take part in the process whereby decisions are taken and implemented.

Of course the rector will have some aims for the church with regard to areas such as service, evangelism, and worship, will keep working at those, and ultimately will not compromise over them or give up on them. But the way those aims are pursued and the timing of attempts to fulfill them may be endlessly negotiable, because the process is part of the aim. The kind of community the rector is committed to building has to be involved in the fulfillment of the aims, otherwise the rector's very aims would not be being fulfilled. In a parallel way, God has some ultimate aims: that people should come to know God and that right should come to prevail in the world. Our prayer needs to accord with God's will in the sense of matching those aims. But because of that concern for process and the building of a community, God is willing to be tirelessly flexible about the fulfillment of these aims.

To intercede, then, is to urge that certain decisions get taken and implemented on the basis of their consistency with the aims. No doubt it needs to be accompanied by a commitment on the intercessors' part to the implementation of the aims, but it loses its intrinsic meaning if it is transformed into a form of prayer whose real significance is to change the people who pray. It is about the taking of decisions regarding what is to happen, and if people do not take part in the urging of certain decisions, the decisions may not get taken in the way they might have urged. The discussions are real, and issue in real change. In the same way it is not necessarily appropriate for intercessors to want to know specifically what God wants before they themselves pray. Their prayer needs to accord with God's policies, but often it plays a part in the determining of God's will rather than merely asking for that will to be implemented.

At least it may do so, if our urging wins its way in the debate. There is no mystery about the fact that many of our contributions to the debate, many of our urgings, do not win assent. As can happen with any item on an agenda, there may be other insights and other factors that overcome our urgings this time. Perhaps another time this will not be so; it is worth keeping making our point, because its moment may come. So we persist in prayer and repeat our prayers. And when we intervene with an "Amen" in the midst of someone's prayer, it is like saying "Yes" or nodding our head when someone makes a contribution to a debate. It adds to the force of the argument. Likewise when Christians pray in Jesus' name, we are claiming that the point we make is in conformity with Jesus' priorities; that too adds to the force of the argument (see, for instance, John 14:13-14; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24).

When the rector as chair proposes a course of action, this really is a proposal not a decision. It is a matter for people to debate, and the debate may lead to a different course of action from the one proposed. In light of the debate the rector will be as free as anyone else to have a change of mind about what should be done, even if this implies no change of mind about ultimate aims. To change one's mind in that context is a sign of strength. In the same way the Bible simply takes for granted that God is free to have a change of mind in the course of equivalent discussions. As we have seen, in the Bible intercession is characteristically designed to change the chair's

mind, about a decision concerning the world (Gen 18) or concerning the people of God (e.g., Exod 32 – 34).

In a single context the First Testament can declare that God does have a change of mind and that God does no such thing, or at least not as a human being does (1 Sam 15:11, 29; cf. Num 23:19). Put alongside each other the second of these safeguards the first by affirming that Yahweh's changes of mind do not indicate inconsistency or fickleness or capriciousness, but it must not be allowed to emasculate the earlier statement as if were a trivial figure of speech. It is an important expression of the standard biblical picture of God living in real relationship with human beings in history and thus acting both by initiative and response.<sup>2</sup>

## 4 Intercession Involves Intervening on Behalf of People

It is characteristic of group deliberations of the kind we have been considering that people speak urgently and fervently on behalf of groups they represent. At least, it should be so, and it is so with intercession. To intercede involves standing in the place of people who need to have their position represented, and speaking from that place. Hebrews 13:3 urges its hearers to remember people who are in prison or who are being tortured "as though you were in prison with them... as though you yourselves were being tortured." Prayer happens "as though." It puts itself in the place of those for whom we pray.

The scriptures' own manual of praises and prayers, the Psalms, includes little that we would recognize as intercession. Psalm 72 is an exception that perhaps proves the rule by making one wonder whether it is really in part a veiled exhortation rather than a prayer. That and other such Psalms for the king (e.g., Ps 20) may also be seen as veiled supplications, because the king's blessing is also the people's blessing. But examples such as Jeremiah's suggest that the psalms of lament were designed to be prayed not merely by the afflicted themselves but by others who prayed with them and on behalf of them. They are prayers prayed for people oppressed or hurting, prayed by people who identify with them and urge their need on God, even in a way they may not be able to do for themselves. These psalms are then intercessions as much as petitions. They point us to the fact that in intercession we identify with those for whom we pray, and pray not for "them" but for "us", as happens in the prayers in Jer 14. This may fit with some instances of the way in which the prayers of the Psalms move between "we/I" and "they" as the intercessor oscillates between identification and distinction. While that may reflect the dynamic of Ps 20 whereby "we" pray for the king because his blessing matters to us, it may sometimes indicate a more altruistic prayer in which I can think of myself as interceding for "them" or for "us."

This motif of identification fits with a linguistic fact. There is a rare Hebrew word that is translated "intercede", *paga'* (e.g., Isa 53:12; Jer 7:16; 15:11). In ordinary speech it means to "meet" or to "intervene" (cf. Gen 23:8, NRSV "entreat"; Ruth 1:16, NRSV "press"; Isa 59:16). An intercessor is one who intervenes on someone's behalf and has a meeting with another person on their behalf. The equivalent New Testament words

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<sup>2</sup> See further chapter 3 above.

*[hyper]entunchano* are also rare; they have the same meaning, though the verbs are not used of human intercession (the noun appears in 1 Tim 2:1).

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Rom 8:26-27 sees the Spirit as our intercessor, while Rom 8:34 and Heb 7:25 see Christ as our intercessor in the manner of an Israelite priest when offering sacrifice or of Moses as covenant mediator (figures who may lie behind the servant “interceding” in Isa 53:12). The implication is that the Spirit or Christ is the one who makes meetings between us and God possible. Christ does that objectively. Because of our behavior we had forfeited our right to membership of the group where decisions get taken, but because Christ died for us we have the right to re-join the meeting, and to speak there. Herein lies another significance of our interceding “in the name of Jesus”: we speak because Jesus brought us back into the cabinet. He makes meetings between us and God possible objectively. The Spirit makes these meetings possible subjectively, giving us the confidence to speak to God, the ideas and words to speak, and the instinct to speak what is in accordance with God’s nature.

But those technical words for intercession are rare in scripture. It more often uses more ordinary words when it wants to speak about intercession, especially the everyday expression “ask on behalf of” somebody. The Bible tends not to use special religious words for our religious activities; it links our religious life with our everyday life. So instead of talking about praying, it talks about asking. And using the same words for asking for things on behalf of others again draws our attention to the fact that intercession is the same as supplication or praying for oneself. We pray as if we were doing it for ourselves when actually we are doing it for someone else. So however we pray for ourselves, in intercession we do that with other people in mind. In his book *Prayer*, Otto Halleby<sup>3</sup> sees prayer as starting from our helplessness and giving God access to our needs in the manner encouraged by the picture in Rev 3:20 where Christ stands seeking access to the community’s heart or life. In intercession we identify with someone else’s helplessness and give God access to their needs, opening the door of their lives on their behalf and asking God to enter.

Intervening and arguing a case may well involve effort and persistence. The New Testament also speaks of a need for effort and persistence in prayer (e.g., Rom 12:12; Col 4:2) and implies it requires self-discipline, hard work and doggedness. In this sense there may be no special or modern reason why Christians are tempted to give up prayer. If the analogy holds between prayer and the confrontational arguing of a case, this may help to indicate why prayer often seems hard work and potentially seems to require perseverance and the refusal to give up a task before it is completed.

Paul indeed speaks of prayer as engaging in a fight (Rom 15:30; Col 2:1; 4:12). For people such as Abraham when he prays for Sodom, and Moses at Sinai praying for Israel, the battle of prayer is a struggle with God, a battle to change God’s mind. For Moses in Exod 17 when the Israelites are fighting the Amalekites and he is lifting up his hand directing the heavenly forces, it is a matter of exercising authority over forces that themselves battle against God’s people; in Eph 6, too, it is a battle against other powers (cf. the battle in Rev 13). In battling to change God’s mind we

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<sup>3</sup> Reprinted London: IVF, 1959.

assume that there is another side to God to appeal to. In battling against other powers we assume that we can appeal to God as the chair of the group.

Another way of expressing what I have described as the objective and subjective aspects to making intercession possible is to see it as involving the work of both priest and prophet. The priest makes it possible by helping to restore people's relationship with Yahweh, and the prophet puts this potential into effect by actually interceding. If the church has Abraham as its example, inherits the priesthood of Christ, and is filled by the Spirit of prophecy, it receives the responsibility of taking its part in the process of heavenly decision-making and representation undertaken by people such as Abraham, Moses, and some prophets by being involved in intercession. If all believers may prophesy and may approach God's presence, it follows that all may individually share in this involvement. Indeed, for them not to do so has the same snags as when some people never take part in a discussion in a meeting. At the same time, if some have a special gift of prophecy or a special position as priests, it follows that some have a special gift or responsibility for intercession. Thus Paul's intercession is an aspect of his exercise of a priestly ministry. Part of his responsibility for the churches in his care was to present them to Christ whole, holy, and mature, when Christ appears (e.g., Rom 15:15-16). So intercession for his people is an aspect of his ministry to his people.

It is a characteristic expression of God's instinctive self-humbling to share with us the making of decisions in the world; and we do this by intercession.